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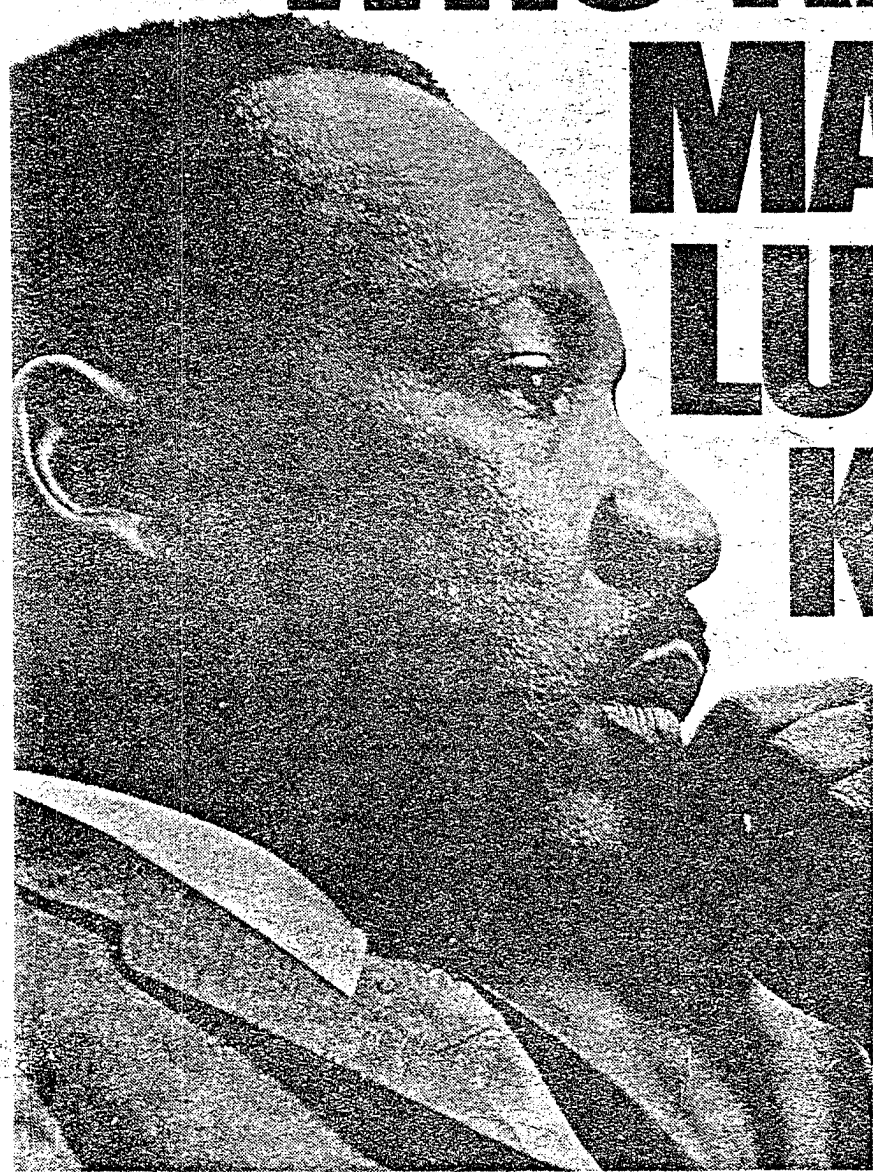
WHO KILLED MARTIN LUTHER KING?



Nine years later...

is the government covering up for the real assassins?

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No answers on King assassination

By John Hawkins
and David Frankel

U.S. Rep. Floyd Fithian took the floor March 22 to argue for extending the House Select Committee on Assassinations. What he had to say, he announced, was "critically important to the coming debate on renewing the life" of the committee.

Congress will decide by March 31—five days before the ninth anniversary of King's April 4, 1968, assassination—whether to continue funding the assassinations investigation.

After a flurry of rhetoric, Fithian read into the record an article on a recently released Gallup opinion poll. It's easy to see why Fithian was concerned:

• Sixty-nine percent of all those polled rejected the official version of King's assassination—84 percent of the Blacks polled and 67 percent of the whites.

• Only 18 percent believe the government version that James Earl Ray was acting alone—20 percent of the whites and 5 percent of the Blacks.

• This suspicion of the government's version of the King assassination is consistent among all ages and income classifications. And the trend toward disbelief of the government's version is growing.

No poll was needed to prove the depth of sentiment for a reinvestigation of King's assassination.

Congress established the Select Committee on Assassinations last September in response to that growing sentiment—especially deep among Blacks. Of course, the committee never intended to go too far. Malcolm X's assassination was not even included among those to be investigated.

But many in Congress apparently prefer not to play with dynamite, even with most stringent safety precautions. This goes for the Carter administration too.

On February 18 the Justice Department released a report on the FBI's investigation of the King assassination.

Not surprisingly, the Justice Department cleared the FBI of any involvement in the assassination and upheld its investigation of King's murder.

In the process of clearing the G-men, however, the report admits that the FBI carried out what a top official called a "no holds barred" war against King.

According to the report, the FBI had five informers operating in the Black movement in Memphis, where King was shot. One FBI agent was spying on striking Black sanitation workers King had come to support.

The Memphis Police Department (MPD) also had its informers—one of them was standing in the courtyard of King's motel at the moment the assassin struck. "From the time of Dr. King's return to Memphis on April 3, 1968, until the time of his assassination, he was under physical surveillance by the MPD," the report states.

The FBI's campaign extended to Coretta King, widow of the slain civil rights leader, and to Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Rev. Andrew Young, now U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

The FBI, the report confirms, resorted to break-ins, electronic surveillance, and slander in its campaign against King.

While admonishing the bureau for its Cointelpro-type methods, the Justice Department upholds the FBI's investigation and surveillance of King:

"Attorney General Kennedy as well as several other Department officials were sincerely concerned with King's association with alleged communist members. . . ."

In the Justice Department's eyes, a citizen's political views determine her or his rights. This is spelled out in their report: "The conclusion that the investigation's continuance was unwarranted is based on the following task force finding:

"The Bureau to date has no evidence whatsoever that Dr. King was ever a communist or affiliated with the CPUSA."

If King had been a communist, the report implies, the "no holds barred" war against him would have been justified.

Meanwhile, little more than a month after the Justice Department issued its report clearing the FBI, the March 23 Louisville *Courier-Journal* reported the disclosure by an ex-Louisville policeman of a conspiracy to assassinate King.

The former policeman, Clifton Baird, described the plot in a letter to U.S. Rep. M. Gene Snyder.

Baird stated that he was offered $500,000 to murder King. He had tape-recorded the conversation and sent it to Snyder also. Baird identified at least three FBI agents and a number of high-ranking Louisville police officers as conspirators in the assassination plot.

This new information reopens the questions the Justice Department sought to close. In and of itself it is sufficient proof of the need for an ongoing investigation.

The House committee staff itself, in the short time it has had to operate so far, has listed some 600 "unresolved questions" in the murder of King. The Justice Department report and the Baird letter and conversation raise even more.

Some of the questions that remain unanswered are:

• Where and how did James Earl Ray obtain the money he lived on between his escape from prison in April 1967 and his arrest in London in June 1968?

Ray is known to have visited Acapulco, Mexico; Birmingham, Alabama; Los Angeles; Montréal; Chicago; New Orleans; Memphis; and Atlanta during this period.

After the assassination he flew from Toronto to London, to Lisbon, and back to London. He was on his way to Brussels when he was captured.

Ray also bought a new car, expensive camera equipment, and other articles. But the FBI has only been able to account for $664.34 Ray earned as a dishwasher shortly after his escape from prison. And it has not been able to link him with any robberies or burglaries committed in this period.

• Why didn't Tennessee authorities insist on a full interrogation of Ray and a full statement from him in return for the plea-bargaining whereby he received a ninety-nine-year sentence rather than the death penalty?

• Did the FBI know of the plot to assassinate King before it took place?

Given the thorough and complete surveillance of King by the FBI, it is unlikely that they did not follow all rumors and leads on people or groups out to get him. The FBI knew every move he made. Such information could easily have been passed on to potential assassins. The Baird letter and conversation strengthen this suspicion.

• Did the Memphis Police Department, undoubtedly working closely with the FBI, have knowledge of the assassination before it took place? What was their agent doing in the courtyard below King's apartment balcony?

These and many other questions remain unanswered. They are not closed by the Justice Department report. The only way the American people will ever be able to find out if the FBI's "no holds barred" assault on King included murder is by opening the secret files for public scrutiny.